Visual Thinking Strategies

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July 6, 2012

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Educators have long united imagery and words to effectively teach. With the growing push for higher standards and achievement, this process has become more necessary than ever before. In the past, the main method was to use imagery as a complement to text or speech. In 1988, Abigail Housen and Phillip Yenawine began to study the effects of using art as the vehicle for analysis and critical thinking amongst students. Collaboratively, they developed Visual Thinking Strategies, more commonly known as VTS, a “learner- centered method that uses art to teach critical thinking skills, communication skills and visual literacy” (Thompson). VTS training in schools and museums focuses on learners analyzing, relating, and examining art, which leads to gains in “language and literacy skills” (“Visual thinking strategies”). VTS has changed art from being a visual accompaniment to being the catalyst for dialogue and thought. The pedagogy asks for students to express their ideas in the safety net of no right or wrong answers, leading to an open environment that cultivates a haven in which students learn to defend their own perspective while absorbing the views of others (Smith, 2008). VTS has been implemented in schools nationwide, using strategies that work for all ages, levels, and backgrounds.

Teacher Audrey Morton Miller expressed that VTS is “an exciting way to get students talking, observing, making inferences, and backing them up. And it's had a big effect on me as a teacher. I've gone from being the expert, the one who always has the knowledge, to being more of a facilitator” (Smith, 2008). VTS calls for students to view and respond to various artworks from a range of genres, artists, and historical contexts. From there, the instructor facilitates conversation, often querying for more in depth responses. Teachers ask guiding questions but allow students to create content, to discuss their ideas about the work whether it be descriptive, contextual, or conceptual. Yenawine stated that “to build a society that is innovative, prosperous, and truly democratic we need to teach next generations not just facts and skills, but how to learn, how to communicate, and how to think creatively, critically, independently" (“Visual Thinking Strategies”). By allowing students to explore the thought process and make meaning of imagery, VTS attempts to reach Yenawine’s goal of independence. Students take charge of their learning, investing in their own worth. VTS has been proven to boost test scores as students increase their observation and reasoning skills. Standardized tests and national and state standards are more frequently asking for not only the skills taught through VTS, but the format of constructed response that is fostered through this pedagogy. Through extensive tests and responses, Housen and Yenawine were able to determine the academic validity of VTS as an intervention tool (“Visual Thinking Strategies”).

VTS has been extensively studied for over 30 years with Housen, a cognitive psychologist, compiling “over 4,000 individual subject interviews” using the Aesthetic Development Interview, or ADI, as the primary tool for study (“Visual Thinking Strategies”). The ADI asks a student to view a work of art and to speak out loud as they think about it. The interview is recorded so it can be later dissected and disseminated into thirteen domains of thought (“Visual Thinking Strategies”). Of great importance is the lack of guiding questions in the interview itself. The interviewer cannot prompt the subject; They can only invite them to share their thoughts. These “unobtrusive measures” and “empirical approach” allowed Housen to let the subject “behave naturally” (“Visual Thinking Strategies”). Once the results are divided into domains, that information is used to determine order and challenge while implementing VTS in the classroom. Housen’s research has been corroborated by independent studies, her writing peer reviewed, and results duplicated in subsequent trials. The call for scientifically researched methods for implementation in the classroom by the national government makes VTS a highly appealing strategy.

Many schools and museums already employ VTS. In schools using VTS, math and reading gains directly correlated with students who had heightened visual literacy (Smith, 2008). As the arts are losing traction in schools, VTS is gaining popularity. A San Antonio school district utilized VTS for their grade 3 through 5 children during the 2000 to 2002 school years. Students who had received this training “significantly outperformed students who did not have VTS lessons in both aesthetic and critical thinking growth (“Visual Thinking Strategies”). This particular study also found that English Language Learners and at-risk students benefited from VTS, also seeing growth in their critical thinking skills. In Boston, Massachusetts during the 2003 to 2007 school years, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum instituted a multiple-visit program that catered to K-8 students, using VTS as a teaching strategy. They concluded that the students participating in this program “generated significantly more instances of critical thinking skills, had more to say, and were more likely to provide evidence for their thinking (“Visual Thinking Strategies”). New York City’s PS 159 has gone beyond the required 10 VTS lessons, some teachers using it in all classes and subjects. They found that VTS gave shy students confidence that was fostered by the safe and respectful environment VTS provides as well as improved test scores (“Visual Thinking Strategies”). These institutions that used VTS used the official model created by Housen and Yenawine. The method calls for teachers to ask three open-ended questions and to facilitate by framing, paraphrasing, and probing without bias. Students in turn observe, discuss ideas, and support their claims with evidence (“Visual Thinking Strategies”). Multiple sessions lead to a safe environment in which to discuss ideas and cultivate creative thinking.

Visual Thinking Strategies embody many attractive qualities to teachers, students, and government. Students enjoy the acts involved with VTS learning that include taking charge of their experience instead of teacher lecturing. Teachers and administration use VTS as a means to create student enthusiasm and accurately prepare students for a world that is not as simple as a fill in the blank test. VTS users have seen significant improvement across subjects. This in turn creates higher scores on standardized tests required by the government. VTS also creates a meaningful place for arts education. It provides scientific research that supports the arts, particularly visual arts, as a core subject that is necessary to the full mental growth of today’s youth. Arts education and students can only benefit by the continued research and institution of Visual Thinking Strategies in classrooms nationwide.

References

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